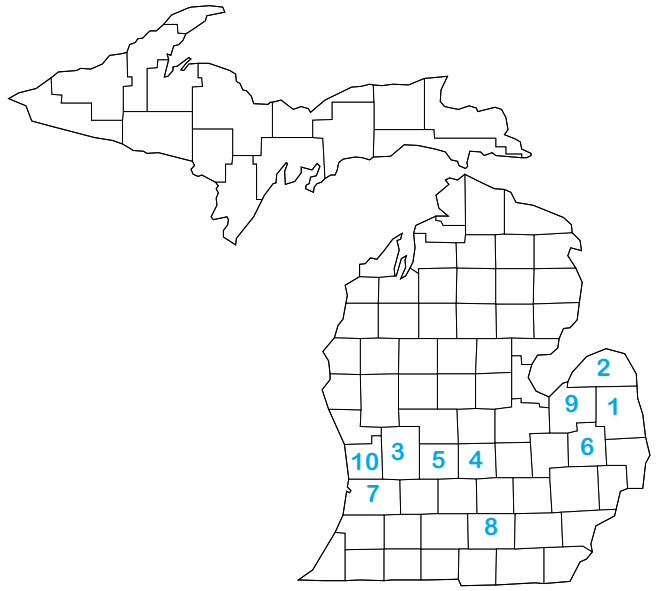


# ALFALFA



**Top 10 MI Counties  
Producing Hay (2000)**

- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| 1) Sanilac | 6) Lapeer  |
| 2) Huron   | 7) Allegan |
| 3) Kent    | 8) Jackson |
| 4) Clinton | 9) Tuscola |
| 5) Ionia   | 10) Ottawa |

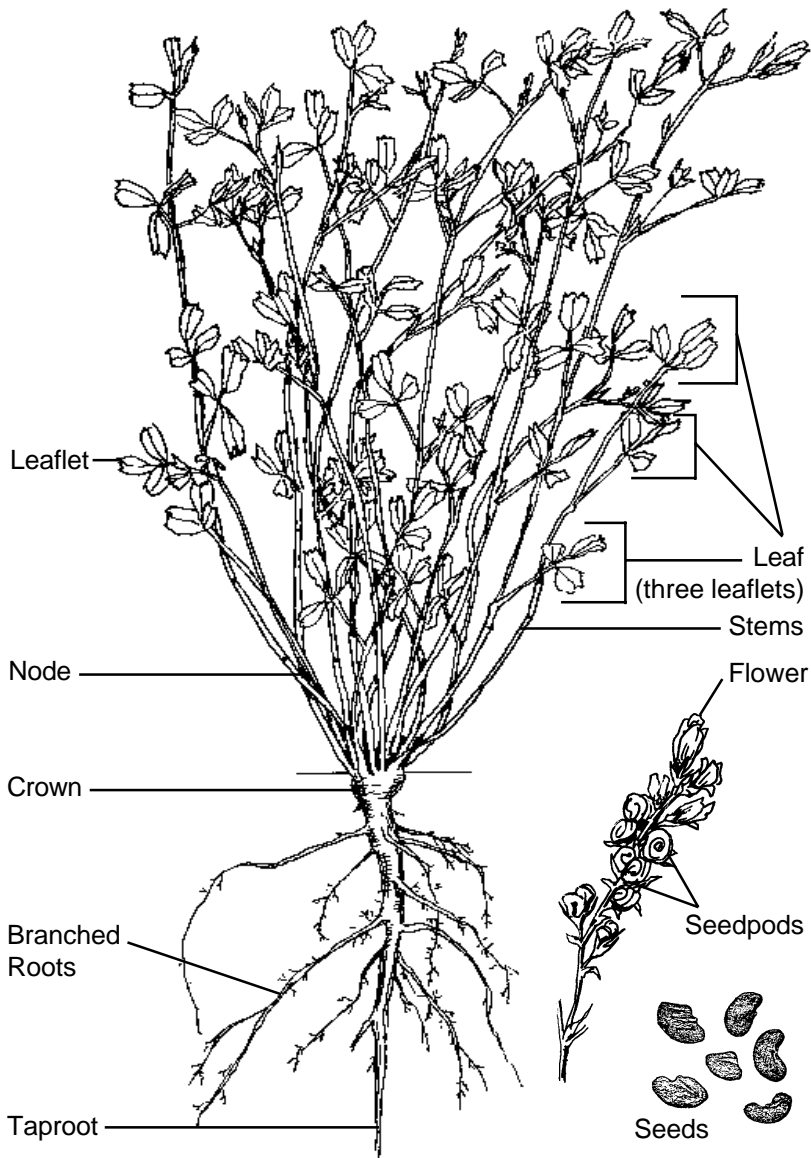


A.

B.

C.

# ALFALFA



## ON THE FRONT

### A. Alfalfa Plant

Alfalfa is a leafy plant, which grows two to three feet tall. More than 33 million acres of alfalfa are planted in the United States each year. Alfalfa is a legume, which means it is a bivalve pod producing plant. It is also able to take nitrogen from the air to feed itself and supply the soil.

### B. Alfalfa Stem (Flowers or Flowering Branch)

The alfalfa branch has purple, white, yellow or lavender flowers where the alfalfa seeds are located. The pods, containing 1 to 12 seeds, are twisted to form a corkscrew of up to five spirals, and are formed following insect pollination.

### C. Alfalfa Seed

Alfalfa seeds are oval to kidney-shaped, very small (averaging 200,000 seeds per pound) and normally olive-green to yellow in color.

## Alfalfa

Alfalfa is mainly used as feed for cattle, sheep and horses. It is the main ingredient in most livestock rations. It is a high quality hay crop grown widely in the United States, and in temperate

regions of South America, Asia and Europe. It can grow in many different climates and can tolerate a variety of soil conditions. Alfalfa is a herbaceous perennial. It is the most important perennial forage legume grown in Michigan and other states in the north central region of the United States.

## Production

Alfalfa is usually planted in April or May using a machine called a drill with 50 seeds per square foot. The drill places the seed into the ground about a half-inch deep. Each row is about four to seven inches apart. Alfalfa is a perennial crop, which means it may grow in the same field four or five years without replanting. Farmers like alfalfa because it is a legume plant which adds nitrogen to the soil. The nitrogen is food for soil and other plants such as corn, which may be grown later in the same field.

## Harvest

In Michigan, the alfalfa plant is harvested two to four times each summer. Harvest occurs at 28 to 35-day intervals in late May to early October. The alfalfa plant grows two to three feet tall and is usually cut in the late bud or early flower stage for best quality. When alfalfa is harvested, a machine called a mower, or a windrower, cuts each plant about four inches from the soil surface.

## Uses

The alfalfa plant may be used as silage or wet feed for cattle. It is ground into fine pieces and placed in a round building called a silo for storage. Pre-flower stage alfalfa is cut and artificially dried to produce dehydrated alfalfa meal, a high protein, high vitamin A source of feed for poultry and hogs. Another way to use alfalfa is to cut it, leave it in the field to dry and then use a machine to make bales of dry hay for cattle, sheep and horses. Bales may be small square, round or large squares. People sometimes eat alfalfa seed sprouts in tossed salads. Michigan farmers, in 2000, harvested 1.3 million acres of hay.

## Did you know . . .

- Called the "Queen of Forages," alfalfa is the world's leading hay crop.
- Alfalfa originated in the Middle East (Turkey). It came to the United States around 1736.
- Winter-hardy varieties were introduced to Minnesota in the mid-1800s. Alfalfa is adapted to many soils, extreme heat and cold, but does not tolerate wet soils or pH levels below 6.0 very well, preferring a pH of 6.5 or higher.

